

Exodus 17: 1-7
Philippians 2: 1-13
Matthew 21: 23-27

What's Power For?
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Here we are in church, our 200-year-old-church in a 500-year-old Protestant tradition in a 2000 year-old Christian tradition with perhaps 3500 year old Jewish roots. There's a lot of power in those traditions. Speaking of traditions, there is an old joke about the Church of England: How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb?...Five, one to change the bulb and four to admire the old one. Obviously, this joke could be used to lampoon any religious institution that admires its own past too much. Churches are such funny places that way.

In the academic world, the study of the church – what is Church – is called ecclesiology. Within that subject, you can study church governance, church doctrine, even church architecture. The word ecclesiology comes from a Greek word that means “called out ones.” We are an assembly of called out ones, the church. But when I want to break it down into its simplest component questions, I would say that ecclesiology asks, “Who belongs, and who's in charge?” And our New Testament readings today really hone in on the second question: who is in charge, who has authority, who has power? And, what is it for?

Our reading from Matthew tells of a tense encounter between Jesus and the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem's temple. What we did not read about is the preceding day's events, when Jesus arrived in the city with a cheering crowd and went and overturned the money-changers' tables at the Temple and generally made a ruckus. So it is very natural that the people in charge there at the Temple would come up to him and ask, “By what authority (or power) are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority (or power)?” In other words, do you have credentials, do you have a permit for this kind of behavior?” By the way, they are pretty sure that the answer is, “No, he doesn't.” They were talking about the kind of power or authority granted to a person or a government by a superior person or government. An example: when I preside over a wedding ceremony, I do so by the authority of the church, and I sign the legal marriage license by the authority of the state. That latter part might seem kind of peculiar, when you think about it...by that's a subject for another day.

Just because a person holds an office that has traditionally had authority does not mean that it is always granted. Authority and power are proved and tested and lived. Otherwise, it becomes kind of hollow, and we question it. We see this happening in our country today, when corruption makes us distrustful of some of our politicians, and we basically deny their authority. We might say that they have abused their authority, and lost it. Or, a person might introduce themselves an authority on child-rearing, and then you meet their children and say, “Really?” Or one might insist that they are an authority on the French language, and then you find that the native speaker can't understand them.

The rise of the internet and blogging has really thrown this into high relief. There is a genre called “spiritual blogger.” A person can write from the comfort of their home, gain a following, and have huge influence over thousands of people they have never met. They can become celebrities,

autonomous, someone anonymous, unconnected to any larger institution or community or ecclesiology. Are they authoritative? 500 years ago, the printing press helped spark the Protestant Reformation, which created a crisis of authority. In some ways, social media has sparked a new cultural and religious turning point, or crisis. Writing about our Gospel passage, Mark Suriano refers to historical theologian Phyllis Tickle. “She studies the shifts in westernized Christianity that have taken place every five hundred years or so (she calls it a rummage sale)--each of these shifts leading to the reexamining of the core question, "Wherein now lies our authority?" She and others consider our current age to be one of these times where the shifts in Christianity are being reshaped through engagement with that core question.”

Back in Jerusalem, Jesus rather neatly answers the priests’ question with another question. We might think that Jesus would have answered, I am the Messiah, or I am the Son of God, or I have been healing people and that shows my power, or I have the power of character to confront the vast and corrupt Roman Empire. But he says none of these things. He seems to change the subject with his question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” He is reframing the question of authority so that the choice is not about what kind of credentials or position in the hierarchy a person holds, but the source of power, the source of inspiration. Human or divine? What they say about John will reveal their attitude towards Jesus.

Here it is their silence that is revealing. The religious authorities deliberate. Religious authorities are so good at that. ☺ If they acknowledge John as a divinely inspired preacher and baptizer, they condemn themselves for not believing and following him. If they say that he was acting on his own, John’s many supporters may turn on them. Notice they never consider answering the question with any heartfelt statement of belief one way or another. They would rather look like idiots and say, “I don’t know,” than continue the dialogue. It is an evasive strategy that reveals a lot about them, but doesn’t really work. Jesus declares that he can also take a pass on answering questions. But that doesn’t mean he can’t offer a parable. ☺

The parable sets up a comparison of two sons. One says he will do the work that his father requests, but doesn’t, while the other refuses to do the work, but then changes his mind and does. Jesus is not using the parable as a nice moral tale that parents can employ today to make their kids feel guilty for not taking out the trash. What we need to remember is that parables pose questions to us, and it is often, where are you in this story? Which son (or daughter) am I? Am I the one who sounds dutiful which being disobedient, or am I the one who looks like a black sheep or a loser but ends up changing and doing the task assigned? Which am I?

This parable not only has a question, it has an accusation. Much like the original question of the elders about authority, it’s a set up. And we cannot jump to the conclusion that Jesus spoke only to the Jewish leaders of his time. That would be too easy for us. He speaks to pastors and choirs and church council members and passersby in the pew. Which am I?

Then Jesus returns from the parable back to John. He puts his cards on the table: “John came to you in the way of righteousness.” John taught people so that they changed their minds. They changed their attitudes. They changed their lives. People who had no hope of acceptance by God found themselves on a path to the Kingdom of God. The authorities, with their restrictive and narrow attitudes, could not accept, could not make this kind of turn-around, could not change. Or maybe they just couldn’t stand the company they would have to mingle with on the path to the

Kingdom of God. It is a motley crew. And so, the one who cried out in the wilderness, who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, preaching repentance and transformation, went unrecognized and un-believed. Some could change their minds – mostly tax collectors and prostitutes – and some couldn't.

As clergy, and as lay leaders, and as church-goers it is tempting for us to assume authority is given by virtue of our ordination, our membership in the Church, or our connection to the cultural privilege traditionally given Christianity in American society. But our credibility and authority as Christians comes from the way we draw near to those Jesus cared for: the outcasts and downtrodden in society, those who have been systematically disadvantaged, and the entire groaning creation for which Jesus gave his life. Just as Jesus flipped the tables in the temple, Jesus flipped the expectations of those in apparent power, and he is flipping our expectations as well. The Kingdom of God does not favor the pious and the privileged, but the one who is in desperate need of God's good news and knows it.

So it is sad that churches have often seemed like exclusive clubs. It means that we are not following Jesus. When the church excludes, it excludes Jesus with all his power and vitality. By virtue of being God's children we are included. That's the reason we baptize babies as well as children and adults. We are all children included because that's what God does and we see it in Jesus. Christian unity is achieved not by like-mindedness or similar political opinions but rather because we have been called out and joined together by one Lord, one faith, one baptism. This is the new community Jesus is in the process of creating. Its commitment to inclusion can make it unique and powerful. Creating it cost Jesus his life but he chose to go through with it anyway. He showed us how to include, and allowed himself to become the one cast out. And then from the cross he cried out God's forgiveness on all who participated in that casting-out process. And that turned out to be the most authoritative, powerful word of all.

By living that life and death, Jesus called us out, assembled us, put us in a group, with the teaching to name those whom the world regard as strangers or enemies as "sister," "brother." Jesus called us out from the world and called us home to do the work of unity, reconciliation, union, communion, community.

That work is hard and has always been hard. Paul's letter to the Philippians shows us that it was hard, right away, less than 30 years after the cross. We infer from his letter that there were divisions and factions in a church (big surprise). He doesn't name the disagreements directly. He doesn't try to position himself on one side or the other, with arguments for and arguments against. Paul doesn't attempt to find some elusive middle-ground or moderating position. Instead, he bursts into song.

Paul sets up his song with a flight of words to remind his readers of the power in their blessed community: encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection, compassion, joy. If these things are important to them, then they have to imagine themselves as molding and melding their minds with the mind of Christ. They have to turn away from selfish ambition and empty conceit and turn towards an example of humility and giving.

The Christ Jesus of this hymn is not jockeying for position, not grasping for power. Incredible divine potential was paired in Jesus with an attitude, a mindset of giving. The song says he took on human form, which by comparison is like being a slave instead of being a ruler. Rather

than claim authority, he claimed obedience. Rather than hold himself above human pain he entered into it fully. If we speak in metaphors of movement, the path of righteousness involves a descent before it becomes an ascent. It involves an emptying before one can be filled. We are fallible, changeable creatures trying to live with and love and heal and help other fallible changeable creatures. Maybe that's what power is for. Maybe humility in this work is more effective than any claim of authority would be.

Jesus worked in human form, not with an appearance of blinding divine power and authority. He was doing the slow and hard and uncertain work of healing and teaching as one of us. In this, his life itself was teaching, an example of someone acting in partnership, in synchronicity with God.

So today, in this place of tradition and hope, we try to follow his example. Faithfully questioning authority when we need too. Faithfully drawing near to those who are oppressed. Faithfully gathering for a communion meal, where God is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for the good. Amen.